

Takoma Park pushes education about tree laws

County Council President Nancy Floreen talks budget at city meeting

by Jeremy Arias | Staff Writer

The Takoma Park City Council urged city Arborist Todd Bolton on Monday to spend more time educating residents about city tree laws than writing citations, which often end up taking large chunks of Bolton's time when they are contested in court.

The arborist presented the problem as a conflict over how his time and effort should be directed, either spending more time in court by writing more citations — thus leaving him less time to tend to other responsibilities, like writing permits or inspecting foliage — or trying to forgo citations by concentrating on educational outreach to residents so that violations do not occur. While Bolton would prefer additional staff to allow him to keep up with enforcement, the council was more in favor of a renewed focus on educational outreach.

Councilwoman Colleen Clay (Ward 2) suggested the city consider having the city's code-enforcement division, which currently handles mostly housing infractions, take on Bolton's enforcement duties. This would free up the arborist to spend more time informing the public, through articles, workshops or other means, how to avoid citations and take care of their trees, she said.

Councilman Terry Seamens (Ward 4) agreed, urging Bolton not to ignore the city newsletter and other media outlets available to promote residents' awareness of city tree ordinances and safe practices.

"It isn't something that we can enforce our way out of," Seamens said of the city's problems controlling invasive species, such as ivy, which often smother trees and can eventually cause them to fall. "The amount of time, the amount of people and the impact that you can have is far greater spending your time convincing people through news articles, snapshot shows and things like that."

While consenting to the council's advice, Bolton maintained some doubt regarding the effectiveness of newsletter and outreach campaigns, expressing his concerns with the approach following the meeting.

"It's either a staffing issue or perhaps a simplification of the code is needed. The education aspect? That's the optimum solution, but that's pretty iffy in my mind," he said.

"Because you have to convince people, and while most people know that ivy is dangerous, that's just not really on their radar screen."

Bolton recalled a \$1,000 citation he wrote that was contested by a couple in District Court in Silver Spring last November that led to a storm of posts on online community list serves when the couple announced to their neighbors that they would appeal the fine on the grounds that Bolton had not entered their property legally.

Despite the allegations made, Bolton viewed the case, which ended when the couple agreed to pay the lowered amount of \$257.50, as a success.

"All of the sudden people were aware that there was a law, because this guy got on the list serv and complained about getting a citation," he said. "So that's education; 'Wait, this can cost me money?' That makes it more important than the dirty laundry."

At least part of the council's reservations regarding hiring additional arborist staff may have been due to the update they received from Montgomery County Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park, who once again warned her city colleagues of the troublesome budget situation earlier in the meeting.

"You said everything is on the table and my sense is that in prior years that hasn't been the case," said Mayor Bruce Williams after Floreen made her opening "doom and gloom" comments on the budget. "Is there any broad area that you could talk about that you're trying to protect [from cuts]?"

The county official was quick to point out that neither she nor her fellow council members would be able to make much speculation in regards to the budget before it is released by County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) later this month.

"[Leggett's] assumptions will be based on the assumptions that are out there right now, which include for example an assumption that the governor's budget will remain unchanged," Floreen said, explaining that, at the state level, Maryland will not likely receive an estimated \$400 million in federal Medicaid funds now that President Barack Obama's health care bill has been stalled.

"So what does that mean in terms of trickle down impact for us? It's early to say," she concluded.